Contrasting Narratives: Netanyahu's Use of Esther and the New Testament's Call to Love Your Enemies

Douglas C. Youvan

doug@youvan.com

October 5, 2024

This paper explores the contrasting interpretations of two powerful religious narratives in the context of modern conflict: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's use of the story of Esther and the New Testament's teaching to "love your enemies." Netanyahu often frames Israel's relationship with adversaries like Iran through Esther's story, emphasizing survival through strength and justifiable defense against existential threats. This narrative aligns with the Jewish festival of Purim, commemorating the Jewish people's deliverance in ancient Persia, and reflects a perspective where vigilance and preemptive action are viewed as essential. In contrast, the New Testament's directive to "love your enemies" invites a radically different approach, emphasizing forgiveness, empathy, and peacebuilding over retaliation. This teaching challenges cycles of hostility, offering a vision of shared humanity that transcends national and religious boundaries. By analyzing these contrasting narratives, the paper highlights their influence on responses to conflict, shaping public opinion and international relations. Through a balanced approach to these powerful narratives, this study seeks to inspire thoughtful engagement in the pursuit of peace.

Keywords: Netanyahu, Esther, Purim, New Testament, love your enemies, Israel, Iran, conflict, peace, religious narratives, forgiveness, retribution.

I. Introduction

Purpose

This paper seeks to explore two fundamentally contrasting perspectives on conflict, survival, and moral responsibility in the face of perceived threats. The first perspective is embodied by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's invocation of the biblical story of Esther as a narrative of Jewish resilience against existential threats, which he uses to frame the modern Israeli-Iranian tensions. In Netanyahu's rhetoric, the story of Esther resonates as a testament to Israel's right to defend itself against adversaries—both ancient and modern—by any necessary means. This interpretation, cast in terms of survival through strength, can be seen as a call for assertive action in the face of perceived existential threats. In contrast, the New Testament offers a perspective that emphasizes reconciliation and peace through Jesus' teaching to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44). Rather than meeting hostility with defensive or preemptive aggression, this directive calls for a radically different response: a commitment to forgiveness, empathy, and peacemaking, even when faced with opposition. By examining these opposing interpretations, this paper aims to highlight how two divergent approaches to conflict and survival have the power to shape political actions, influence public opinion, and impact regional stability.

Background

The story of Esther, recounted in the Hebrew Bible, centers on a young Jewish woman in Persia who becomes queen and discovers a plot by Haman, a high-ranking official, to annihilate her people. Esther, with courage and cunning, uses her influence to reveal Haman's plot to King Ahasuerus and successfully protects the Jewish people from destruction. The Purim festival commemorates this deliverance, celebrating Jewish resilience, bravery, and survival in the face of adversity. Netanyahu has drawn on Esther's story in his messaging, framing Israel's contemporary challenges with Iran as a continuation of ancient struggles for survival. This use of Esther resonates deeply within Jewish communities, where her story is seen as a powerful reminder of the Jewish people's enduring resilience.

On the other hand, Jesus' teaching in the New Testament presents an alternative model for confronting conflict. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his

followers to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” This teaching advocates for responses rooted in forgiveness, empathy, and a commitment to peace, offering an approach that challenges cycles of hostility. Jesus’ directive, revolutionary in its time, calls for a perspective that sees even adversaries as part of a shared humanity. When applied to modern conflicts, this approach presents an ethical tension with narratives like Esther’s that emphasize survival through strength and defensive action. The tension between these perspectives highlights the different ways religious stories and teachings can shape responses to conflict, especially in regions with profound religious significance like the Middle East.

Significance

Understanding these contrasting perspectives is crucial because they do more than shape religious or cultural beliefs; they influence real-world political actions, public opinion, and international relations. Netanyahu’s invocation of Esther speaks directly to a collective sense of survival within Israel, encouraging resilience against perceived threats but also potentially reinforcing an “us versus them” narrative that may amplify regional tensions. By framing Israel’s survival in the same terms as Esther’s story, this rhetoric can foster a mindset that views peace as secondary to self-preservation, potentially encouraging actions that could escalate rather than resolve conflicts.

Conversely, the New Testament’s teaching to love one’s enemies offers a radically different approach, inviting leaders and citizens to consider pathways to peace that prioritize empathy and reconciliation. This perspective challenges retaliatory mindsets and promotes a vision of shared humanity, where conflict resolution hinges on understanding and forgiveness rather than defensive posturing. For an international audience, particularly those in or near conflict zones, these contrasting approaches provide two distinct lenses for viewing political and ethical responsibility. As religious narratives continue to be invoked in contemporary Middle Eastern affairs, these perspectives invite reflection on the profound impact that interpretive choices can have on diplomacy, peacemaking efforts, and the ethical implications of leadership.

In exploring the contrasting perspectives of Netanyahu’s use of Esther and Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies, this paper illuminates the broader implications of

religious narratives in shaping both personal convictions and national policies. By engaging with these narratives, the discussion aims to deepen the understanding of how ancient stories inform modern actions, encouraging a reflection on the power of rhetoric to either reinforce cycles of conflict or open pathways toward reconciliation.

II. Survival Through Strength vs. Love and Reconciliation

Netanyahu's Perspective

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's invocation of Esther's story as a modern-day symbol of Jewish survival and national resilience taps into deep historical and cultural roots. In the Book of Esther, the Jewish people in ancient Persia face an existential threat from Haman, an official who plots to annihilate them. Queen Esther, by courageously leveraging her position, reveals the plot to King Ahasuerus and secures the survival of her people. This story is celebrated through the festival of Purim, which commemorates the Jewish people's miraculous deliverance from genocide. For Netanyahu, Esther's narrative serves as more than just a tale of survival; it embodies a call to remain vigilant against those who pose existential threats to Israel. By invoking this story in the context of Israeli-Iranian relations, Netanyahu draws a parallel between Haman's ancient plot and the modern threat he perceives from Iran's leadership, suggesting that survival necessitates a position of unyielding strength.

Netanyahu's rhetoric emphasizes preemptive action and defensive resilience as essential to ensuring Israel's security. This perspective promotes the idea that survival depends on anticipating and countering threats before they materialize. Drawing from Esther's story, Netanyahu's message underscores a stance of assertive self-defense, suggesting that, like Esther, Israel must take bold steps to neutralize threats. In this view, defensive strength is paramount, and preemptive action is framed as both a moral and practical imperative. For Netanyahu, the preservation of Israel and the protection of its citizens are inseparably tied to a proactive stance against adversaries, which he perceives as an extension of the Jewish people's historical legacy of resilience.

New Testament's Approach

In stark contrast, Jesus' teachings in the New Testament present a radically different approach to conflict and survival. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his followers to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). This message advocates for responses to conflict that are rooted not in retaliation or preemptive action but in empathy, forgiveness, and peace. Instead of framing survival as a matter of strength and confrontation, Jesus calls for a path that prioritizes reconciliation and understanding, even toward those who may intend harm. For Jesus, resilience is not merely a matter of defending oneself against enemies but involves transforming relationships through love and compassion, transcending hostility and creating conditions for genuine peace.

Jesus' message of "loving your enemies" challenges his followers to view adversaries as individuals deserving of empathy, not merely as threats to be neutralized. This directive is a profound departure from the typical human response to hostility, advocating for a mindset that seeks peace as the highest goal. The New Testament's approach to survival and resilience is rooted in nonviolence and the conviction that love and forgiveness are powerful forces capable of dismantling enmity. In this light, survival is not about defensive strength but about breaking cycles of hostility and creating a world where mutual respect and empathy prevail. This perspective does not deny the reality of threats but invites followers to respond in ways that foster healing and reconciliation, even at the cost of immediate security.

Contrast

The ideological differences between Netanyahu's use of Esther and the New Testament's teaching on loving enemies reflect profoundly divergent views on conflict, resilience, and the nature of survival. Netanyahu's interpretation of Esther frames survival as dependent on vigilance, strength, and preemptive action. In this view, securing Israel's future means remaining ready to confront and neutralize threats. Esther's story, as used by Netanyahu, suggests a world where threats are perpetual, and survival requires an unyielding stance. This approach can encourage a posture of defensive strength that risks reinforcing

cycles of enmity, as each preemptive or retaliatory action may provoke further hostility from those viewed as adversaries.

In contrast, the New Testament's call to "love your enemies" offers a vision of survival that seeks to overcome hostility through empathy and forgiveness. Jesus' teachings advocate for a response to conflict that prioritizes peace and reconciliation over confrontation, challenging followers to embrace a vision of shared humanity even with adversaries. This perspective sees resilience not as strength against others but as the capacity to transcend enmity and foster unity. In situations of tension, Jesus' teaching would likely encourage efforts toward dialogue, diplomacy, and understanding as tools for lasting peace, rather than focusing on the anticipation and defeat of threats.

These opposing perspectives could lead to vastly different responses to conflict. Where Netanyahu's interpretation of Esther may promote defensive actions that prioritize immediate security, the New Testament's message calls for restraint and the pursuit of peace, even if this means taking risks for the sake of reconciliation. Netanyahu's perspective encourages a worldview in which security is achieved through power, whereas Jesus' teaching presents a vision of security that is rooted in the transformative power of love and understanding. In the Middle East, where historical grievances run deep and mutual suspicion is high, these contrasting narratives have significant implications, shaping whether leaders and their supporters see conflict as inevitable or believe in the potential for a peace built on empathy and unity.

III. Justice vs. Mercy

Netanyahu and Justice

In Netanyahu's framing, the story of Esther serves as a narrative of just retribution against a clear and imminent threat, casting Israel's right to self-defense in terms that resonate with themes of justice and moral necessity. Esther's story is marked by the Jewish people's deliverance from Haman's plot to annihilate them, culminating in Haman's downfall and the defeat of those who sought to carry out his plan. For Netanyahu, invoking Esther aligns with a vision of justice that demands decisive action to protect Israel from perceived existential

threats, particularly from Iran, which he has frequently portrayed as a modern-day Haman.

This framing not only justifies defensive measures but also casts them as morally imperative, where failure to act is seen as a dereliction of duty to protect the nation. In this view, justice is not merely a legal or procedural concept but a form of moral retribution—protecting the innocent by taking preemptive or retaliatory actions against those deemed hostile. Netanyahu's emphasis on Esther's story thus reinforces the notion that Israel's security is rooted in its right to act against adversaries who pose a genuine threat to its existence. For Netanyahu and his supporters, the framing of Esther as a story of justice validates Israel's need to be proactive and uncompromising in its defense policies, ensuring that no potential "Haman" can endanger the state without consequence.

Jesus and Mercy

In contrast, the New Testament's teachings present a vision of mercy that diverges significantly from the retributive justice exemplified in Esther's story. Jesus' emphasis on mercy over justice offers an alternative framework for responding to conflict, one that prioritizes compassion, forgiveness, and peace rather than punishment. Where Esther's story ends with the destruction of the threat, Jesus' message would suggest the possibility of reconciliation even with one's enemies. In his teachings, Jesus often subverts traditional understandings of justice by focusing on the power of forgiveness and the importance of breaking cycles of enmity. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7), suggesting that mercy itself is a form of divine justice, creating conditions where both individuals and communities can transcend past wrongs.

Rather than meeting hostility with retribution, the New Testament calls followers to "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:39), implying a form of justice that is rooted in restraint and empathy rather than punishment. This teaching emphasizes that mercy has the power to transform relationships and, ultimately, society itself, by breaking cycles of conflict and creating pathways for peace. Jesus' message challenges his followers to see adversaries not as enemies to be punished but as individuals deserving of compassion, which can lead to a radical restructuring of the ethical framework in which conflict is approached. In this perspective, mercy

is not a passive or weak response but an active choice that allows healing and promotes peace. Where Netanyahu's interpretation of Esther frames survival through decisive, protective action, Jesus' vision of mercy calls for restraint and understanding, suggesting that true security lies in creating conditions where peace can flourish.

Ethical Implications

The ethical implications of these contrasting approaches are profound, especially in the context of escalating Middle Eastern conflicts, where cycles of retributive justice often fuel long-standing animosities. Netanyahu's approach, rooted in justice as retribution, risks reinforcing these cycles. By framing defense policies and preemptive actions as morally justified responses to perceived existential threats, this perspective can create an environment where every act of self-defense is met with retaliatory hostility from the opposing side, perpetuating a continuous loop of aggression. In this view, justice is bound to principles of right and wrong that demand retribution against those who act as adversaries, creating a culture where survival depends on the neutralization of threats rather than the possibility of reconciliation.

The New Testament's emphasis on mercy offers an alternative ethical framework that seeks to disrupt this cycle of conflict. Mercy, as understood in Jesus' teachings, invites individuals and nations to consider forgiveness and peaceful resolution even in the face of wrongdoing. The ethical consequence of this approach is that it opens avenues for understanding, healing, and reconciliation, fostering a climate where peace is achievable without retribution. The call to mercy shifts the focus from the actions of others to one's own response, creating space for dialogue, empathy, and a shared pursuit of harmony. Ethically, this approach reframes justice as something that extends beyond punishment to include the moral responsibility to foster peace, even when that means foregoing the immediate satisfaction of retribution.

Yet, the choice between justice as retribution and mercy as transformation is not without complexity. Netanyahu's framing of Esther and his focus on protective justice reflects an ethical duty to protect, particularly when security and survival are at stake. This approach raises questions about the responsibilities of leadership and the ethics of ensuring security for one's people by taking

necessary actions against threats. However, as the New Testament's emphasis on mercy suggests, justice pursued without compassion risks creating more harm, potentially escalating conflicts that could be resolved through understanding and reconciliation.

In essence, the ethical consequences of each approach hinge on how survival and justice are defined: either as a matter of decisively neutralizing threats or as a transformative process that seeks to heal and unify. Netanyahu's interpretation of Esther embodies a justice that leaves little room for forgiveness, framing security as contingent on decisive action against adversaries. Jesus' teachings on mercy, however, offer a framework where justice and peace are intertwined, suggesting that sustainable peace arises when cycles of retribution are replaced with compassionate responses. These contrasting perspectives underscore a fundamental ethical tension between justice that demands action and mercy that offers peace, each with its own implications for personal and international conduct in a complex world.

IV. National Identity vs. Shared Humanity

Netanyahu's Emphasis on National Identity

In Netanyahu's invocation of Esther's story, there is a clear emphasis on the idea of Jewish national identity as one forged through resilience against external adversaries. The Book of Esther, which recounts the Jewish people's survival against Haman's plot in ancient Persia, is deeply woven into Jewish history and identity. In framing Israel's modern-day conflicts with nations like Iran through Esther's story, Netanyahu taps into a narrative that positions the Jewish people in a long-standing, divinely supported struggle to protect their nation from existential threats. For Netanyahu, this emphasis serves to unify Israeli society under a shared historical memory, reinforcing the notion of Israel as a small but resilient state surrounded by adversaries.

Netanyahu's use of Esther highlights a concept of identity centered on the idea of survival against forces that seek Israel's destruction. This framing portrays Israel's security challenges as a continuation of ancient threats, aligning modern adversaries with Haman's role in the Purim story. In this sense, Netanyahu's

rhetoric strengthens the notion of Israel as a nation constantly required to defend itself against those who would see it erased, a theme that appeals to national solidarity and resilience. This emphasis on national identity can foster a sense of unity within Israel, where citizens see themselves as part of a unique historical and spiritual journey. Yet, this perspective also risks creating a mindset of perpetual vigilance and separation from neighboring nations, casting them not as potential partners but as continuous threats to be monitored and, if necessary, opposed.

By reinforcing a narrative of "us versus them," Netanyahu's invocation of Esther may strengthen Israel's resolve but can also contribute to an isolating stance in the Middle East. This emphasis on a distinct national identity, often portrayed as inherently at odds with surrounding countries, risks entrenching divisions, as it suggests that survival and success are achieved by remaining distinct from or even opposed to regional neighbors. Such a narrative can shape public perception, creating an environment where compromise is seen as weakness and the defense of identity is paramount. In this view, national identity is intimately tied to self-preservation, an idea that resonates powerfully with citizens but can complicate relationships with neighboring states.

Jesus' Vision of Shared Humanity

In contrast, Jesus' teachings in the New Testament propose a radically inclusive vision that calls for seeing all people as part of a shared humanity, regardless of national, ethnic, or religious affiliations. In teachings such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), Jesus breaks down the boundaries between "us" and "them," emphasizing that love and compassion transcend social, religious, and political divides. Jesus' call to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44) is a direct challenge to frameworks that prioritize national identity over shared humanity, urging followers to extend empathy and care even to those outside their immediate community. In this vision, adversaries are not fixed roles; they are individuals deserving of understanding and compassion.

Jesus' perspective on shared humanity suggests that true strength lies in unity, empathy, and the ability to look beyond historical divisions. His teachings invite followers to see adversaries as people, emphasizing the importance of overcoming enmity through dialogue and compassion. This vision presents a path

toward peaceful coexistence that is grounded not in self-defense against a defined “other” but in embracing a global community where all people are recognized as valuable. For Jesus, identity is rooted in a shared divine connection, and it is this connection that should guide interactions, even with those who may seem like enemies. Rather than fostering a sense of separation or perpetual vigilance, this perspective encourages breaking down barriers and fostering unity across communities.

In the context of the Middle East, where religious and national identities often drive conflict, Jesus’ vision of shared humanity challenges divisive narratives. It offers a perspective in which cooperation and empathy replace defensive posturing. This approach can create opportunities for dialogue and conflict resolution, inviting individuals and nations to view each other not as adversaries defined by history or politics but as part of a collective human journey. By emphasizing common ground and shared values, this vision seeks to build relationships that transcend historical grievances, fostering a future based on understanding rather than division.

Implications for Regional Perception

These contrasting approaches to identity—Netanyahu’s emphasis on national distinctiveness and Jesus’ focus on shared humanity—have significant implications for both Israeli identity and broader international relations. Netanyahu’s framing of national identity, where survival is tied to vigilance against external threats, can reinforce perceptions of Israel as a state inherently at odds with its neighbors. In the Middle East, where historical tensions run deep, this approach can exacerbate existing divides, as it positions Israel in a defensive stance that views peace as secondary to self-preservation. This perspective shapes public opinion within Israel, potentially creating an environment where compromise is viewed as a risk to national integrity. Regionally, it can foster mistrust, as neighboring states may interpret this emphasis on distinctiveness as resistance to integration or diplomacy.

On the other hand, a perspective rooted in shared humanity has the potential to reshape relationships by promoting a sense of mutual respect and common purpose. Jesus’ call to transcend boundaries and love one’s enemies provides a framework for approaching conflict with empathy, even in situations marked by

deep-rooted tensions. If embraced as a guiding principle, this vision could shift regional perceptions, presenting Israel not as an isolated state but as a nation invested in peace and collaboration. By framing identity as interconnected rather than adversarial, this approach encourages partnerships and reduces the likelihood of zero-sum thinking, where one nation's success is seen as another's loss.

In an international context, Netanyahu's focus on a distinct national identity may resonate with Israel's allies, particularly those who view Israel as a strategic partner in the Middle East. However, this approach can also limit Israel's soft power, as it reinforces an image of Israel as isolated and defensive. Alternatively, a vision of shared humanity aligns with global peace efforts and multilateralism, appealing to international organizations and nations invested in resolving conflicts through diplomacy. Jesus' emphasis on universal compassion aligns with international principles of human rights and equality, making it a framework that could garner broader global support for Israel if applied to its foreign policy.

Ultimately, the choice between prioritizing national identity and embracing shared humanity is more than a theological or cultural decision; it shapes the actions of leaders, the perceptions of citizens, and the dynamics of international relations. In a region as complex and historically charged as the Middle East, these perspectives can either deepen divides or create new pathways toward understanding and peace. Where Netanyahu's approach highlights resilience through separation, Jesus' teaching invites a vision of resilience through unity—a call that, if embraced, could foster a future where cooperation and shared values take precedence over historical grievances and divisions.

V. Cycles of Retaliation vs. Paths of Peace

Esther's Narrative and Retaliation

In invoking the story of Esther, Netanyahu emphasizes a narrative of justified defense, where preemptive and retaliatory actions are essential to ensuring survival. Esther's story, at its heart, recounts a tale of deliverance through decisive action: the Jewish people, upon discovering Haman's plot to annihilate them, are granted permission to defend themselves and ultimately succeed in

overpowering their enemies. For Netanyahu, this narrative serves as a powerful symbol of resilience and proactive self-defense, suggesting that Israel must remain vigilant and prepared to take strong actions against perceived threats, especially from adversaries like Iran. By aligning current challenges with the ancient story of Esther, Netanyahu frames retaliation and preemptive measures as morally justifiable responses to safeguard Israel's existence.

This framing, however, risks reinforcing a cycle of retaliation in which each action is met with further escalation. When Esther's story is used to justify modern-day preemptive or retaliatory policies, it establishes a precedent where aggressive responses are seen as the most viable path to security. This approach, while understandable in the context of self-defense, can provoke reciprocal hostility from those perceived as threats, leading to a continuous loop of action and reaction. Each act of self-defense or retaliation becomes a new provocation, potentially validating the adversary's own defensive or retaliatory actions. In this cycle, perceived existential threats prompt increasingly aggressive policies on both sides, heightening tensions and making peaceful resolution more elusive. This dynamic can also harden attitudes within the nation, as citizens become accustomed to viewing conflict as inevitable and preemptive strikes as necessary measures to counteract hostility.

The ethical implications of this cycle are significant. By relying on the story of Esther to justify strong defensive actions, there is a risk of normalizing a defensive posture that prioritizes immediate security over long-term peace. In Netanyahu's framing, Israel's survival is contingent on its willingness to take action, even when this action risks exacerbating hostilities. The emphasis on retaliation and preemption reinforces a sense of perpetual conflict, where adversaries are seen not as potential partners in peace but as enduring threats to be countered. This approach, while fostering a strong sense of national unity and resolve, limits the possibility of breaking free from cycles of hostility and can entrench divisions that fuel sustained conflict.

Jesus' Vision of Peace

In stark contrast, Jesus' teaching to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44) presents a radically different approach to handling conflict—one that seeks to break the cycle of retaliation and replace it with a commitment to peace, understanding,

and reconciliation. Jesus' message emphasizes that hostility need not be met with further hostility but can be overcome by reaching out with empathy, forgiveness, and a willingness to bridge divides. This vision encourages individuals to see their adversaries as fellow human beings and to prioritize peace over retribution, even in situations where conflict seems inevitable.

Jesus' directive to love enemies disrupts the retributive logic that perpetuates cycles of hostility. Instead of retaliating against aggression, Jesus advocates for responses rooted in compassion and restraint. This approach challenges followers to transcend their immediate emotions and perceived need for justice, choosing instead to respond to conflict in a way that fosters understanding and de-escalation. By loving one's enemies, Jesus implies that peace is not a passive state but an active pursuit, achieved through conscious, often difficult choices to break patterns of animosity. This vision of peace suggests that cycles of hostility can be dismantled when individuals and communities embrace forgiveness over retribution, viewing even adversaries as deserving of compassion and empathy.

From a policy perspective, applying Jesus' teaching to international relations would encourage diplomatic efforts, dialogue, and mutual respect over preemptive or retaliatory actions. This vision of peace opens pathways for constructive engagement, even in the face of deep-seated grievances, promoting a future where conflict resolution is achieved through negotiation rather than force. By choosing understanding over aggression, Jesus' vision invites nations to reframe their approach to adversaries, seeing them as potential partners in peace rather than fixed opponents in a zero-sum game. This approach has the potential to foster a climate where cooperation and compromise replace suspicion and antagonism, creating conditions where lasting peace becomes attainable.

Potential Outcomes

The outcomes of these contrasting approaches—retaliation versus paths of peace—can shape the likelihood of either sustained conflict or long-term stability. In Netanyahu's framework, where Esther's narrative is invoked to justify defensive and preemptive actions, the potential for sustained conflict is high. This approach, rooted in cycles of retribution, perpetuates an environment where each side perceives the other as an enduring threat, justifying further defensive measures and reinforcing a mindset of vigilance. The focus on retributive justice

fosters a zero-sum worldview in which any gain for the adversary is perceived as a loss for oneself, limiting the potential for cooperative engagement. In this context, peace is often seen as an unstable state, achievable only through overwhelming strength or temporary ceasefires rather than through genuine reconciliation.

Conversely, Jesus' vision of peace, grounded in the transformative power of empathy and forgiveness, opens the possibility for more sustainable and lasting peace. By advocating for a perspective that seeks to understand rather than retaliate, this approach offers a framework for breaking cycles of hostility and moving toward constructive engagement. If applied in the Middle Eastern context, Jesus' teaching would encourage leaders and citizens to see beyond immediate grievances and consider the potential for long-term harmony. This approach suggests that peace can be achieved when adversaries are engaged as partners in dialogue rather than foes in an existential struggle. By choosing paths of peace over retaliation, nations can work toward resolutions that do not merely suspend hostilities but actively build relationships grounded in mutual respect and understanding.

While breaking cycles of retaliation requires courage and significant shifts in perspective, the potential benefits are profound. By fostering an environment where peace is prioritized over retributive justice, societies can begin to dismantle long-standing divisions, creating spaces where cooperation can flourish. Jesus' vision challenges the assumption that conflict is inevitable, presenting an alternative where peace is seen not as a fleeting state but as an achievable and sustainable goal. In regions marked by historical grievances, this approach has the power to transform adversarial relationships, replacing fear and hostility with collaboration and shared purpose.

In summary, Netanyahu's use of Esther reinforces a paradigm of survival through strength, one that risks perpetuating cycles of retaliation and escalation. Jesus' call to "love your enemies," however, offers a different model—one that encourages breaking these cycles by choosing peace over conflict, forgiveness over retribution. These approaches shape not only policy but the very fabric of public perception and national identity. In a world where cycles of hostility continue to fuel conflict, the choice between retaliation and reconciliation holds

the potential to determine whether peace remains a distant ideal or becomes a lasting reality.

VI. The Broader Ethical and Theological Implications

Moral Responsibility

Political and religious leaders hold a profound responsibility to consider the ethical impact of the narratives they promote, especially when these narratives frame conflict as inevitable or righteous. Leaders who invoke stories like Esther to justify preemptive or retaliatory measures wield the power to shape not only policies but public perception and cultural memory. When conflict is presented as a morally righteous endeavor, it can galvanize public support, uniting communities around a sense of collective survival or defense. However, this framing also risks creating an ethical blind spot, where the complexity of peace and reconciliation is overshadowed by a single-minded focus on survival at all costs.

In this context, leaders bear a responsibility to recognize that narratives emphasizing righteous conflict can influence individuals to see aggression as a moral duty rather than a last resort. The ethical responsibility lies in balancing the legitimate need for security with a commitment to principles that encourage peace, empathy, and understanding. Leaders who fail to consider the broader implications of their messaging may inadvertently foster a culture where peace seems naive or impossible, reinforcing cycles of hostility rather than fostering paths toward dialogue and mutual respect.

Religious communities, too, share this responsibility, as they often play a significant role in interpreting and disseminating these narratives to their followers. When religious communities frame conflict as a righteous struggle against evil, they risk alienating potential allies, fostering an environment where reconciliation becomes secondary to victory. The moral obligation of religious leaders, then, is to guide their communities toward interpretations that align with compassion, empathy, and the pursuit of peace. By highlighting values that emphasize shared humanity and understanding, leaders can honor their traditions

while actively contributing to a climate where ethical considerations guide responses to conflict.

The Role of Religious Narratives in Peacebuilding

Religious narratives hold immense potential to either deepen divides or foster reconciliation, depending on how they are interpreted and applied. Stories like Esther and teachings like Jesus' call to "love your enemies" provide two powerful yet contrasting frameworks. On one hand, Esther's story could be interpreted to underscore the importance of vigilance and resilience, but it can also be seen as a call to community strength in a way that transcends antagonistic boundaries. Rather than focusing solely on the defeat of an adversary, Esther's narrative could be reframed to celebrate the courage and advocacy needed to protect vulnerable communities without resorting to perpetual hostility. When approached this way, Esther's story becomes a source of inspiration for protecting one's people while remaining open to future peace and cooperation.

Similarly, Jesus' teaching to "love your enemies" offers an explicitly peace-centered framework that calls followers to dismantle cycles of retribution. By actively choosing empathy and compassion over retaliation, this teaching presents a path toward healing that values relationships over victory. Reinterpreting this teaching within the context of international relations could encourage leaders and individuals alike to prioritize understanding and dialogue over conflict. Jesus' message of loving one's enemies can be a tool for reconciliation, a reminder that peace is an active pursuit requiring intentional choices that promote harmony and mutual respect. Leaders and communities who adopt this perspective can use it to build bridges across divides, transforming potential antagonism into opportunities for collaboration and mutual growth.

In peacebuilding, religious narratives serve as more than symbolic stories; they provide frameworks that guide real-world actions and policies. Reinterpreting stories like Esther and teachings like those of Jesus to emphasize reconciliation rather than division has the potential to change the trajectory of conflicts, fostering atmospheres where dialogue, compromise, and respect take precedence over antagonism. This reinterpretation is not about ignoring past struggles or dismissing historical grievances but about framing them in ways that encourage moving forward with empathy and mutual understanding. In regions

marked by longstanding divisions, religious narratives that emphasize unity can help heal wounds and open avenues for a more peaceful coexistence.

Consequences for Public Perception

The way religious narratives are presented and interpreted has a powerful impact on public opinion, shaping how communities view both conflict and peace. When leaders use narratives like Esther's story to justify conflict, it can create a public perception that views war or aggression as a morally justifiable or even inevitable course of action. In such cases, the public may come to see peace as unrealistic or see attempts at dialogue as signs of weakness. This framing risks creating an "us versus them" mentality, where empathy for adversaries is viewed as disloyalty to one's community or nation. For the public, religious stories framed in terms of righteous conflict may solidify a mindset where the only path to security is through defensive strength, reinforcing suspicion and closing the door on peaceful solutions.

Alternatively, religious teachings that emphasize shared humanity and the pursuit of peace, such as Jesus' message to love one's enemies, can profoundly influence public attitudes toward conflict and reconciliation. When leaders highlight narratives that celebrate forgiveness and empathy, they encourage the public to see adversaries as individuals rather than faceless threats. This shift in perspective promotes a culture where peace is valued as both a moral and practical goal, encouraging citizens to support initiatives that prioritize dialogue, diplomacy, and mutual respect. When religious stories are framed in ways that celebrate unity and understanding, they can inspire people to see peace as not only attainable but as an essential pursuit for the common good.

For public opinion, the stakes are high. The narratives promoted by leaders and religious communities shape how people perceive the viability of peace, often influencing support for policies that either deepen divides or seek reconciliation. Religious narratives that focus on shared humanity help foster a public climate where individuals are more open to peacemaking efforts, viewing their communities not as isolated but as part of a larger, interconnected world. By focusing on values that bridge divides, these narratives can cultivate empathy and reduce hostility, fostering a society that actively seeks harmony and collaborative solutions.

In summary, the ethical and theological implications of using religious narratives in conflict or peacebuilding are profound. Leaders and religious communities bear a moral responsibility to consider how these narratives are framed, recognizing the potential to either promote cycles of conflict or pave paths toward peace. Stories like Esther and Jesus' teachings have dual potential: they can be used to reinforce divisions or to inspire reconciliation and empathy. By choosing interpretations that emphasize shared humanity and the pursuit of peace, leaders can shape public perception in ways that support not just immediate security but lasting, meaningful harmony. In a world where conflict too often dominates, these narratives hold the power to remind us that peace, founded on respect and understanding, is not only possible but essential.

VII. Conclusion

Summary of Contrasts

This paper has examined the profound contrasts between Netanyahu's invocation of the story of Esther and the New Testament's teaching to "love your enemies," highlighting how these narratives promote vastly different responses to conflict. Netanyahu's framing of Esther reinforces a narrative of survival through strength, rooted in historical memories of Jewish resilience against existential threats. This approach justifies preemptive and retaliatory actions as morally necessary for safeguarding Israel, creating a sense of collective identity based on vigilant self-defense. In contrast, the New Testament's emphasis on loving enemies encourages responses grounded in empathy, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Rather than viewing adversaries solely as threats, this perspective invites a broader understanding of shared humanity, advocating for paths toward peaceful coexistence and dialogue. These contrasting interpretations lead to different approaches to conflict—one that prioritizes defensive strength and readiness to confront perceived threats, and another that seeks to transcend hostilities through acts of compassion and unity.

Call for Responsible Rhetoric

Given the power of religious narratives to shape perspectives on conflict and peace, there is a pressing need for responsible rhetoric in political and religious

discourse. Leaders and religious figures who invoke stories like Esther or Jesus' teachings wield significant influence over public perception and policy, shaping how communities understand their relationship with adversaries and approach solutions to conflict. It is essential that these figures consider the ethical implications of using religious stories to frame contemporary issues, as narratives that glorify defensive aggression or retribution can fuel cycles of hostility, while those emphasizing peace and empathy have the potential to de-escalate tensions and promote reconciliation.

Ethical rhetoric in this context does not dismiss the legitimate need for security or resilience but recognizes the harm that can come from narratives that frame conflict as inevitable or righteous. A responsible approach to religious storytelling in politics involves framing these narratives in ways that inspire individuals and communities to seek peace, resist antagonism, and prioritize compassion. Leaders who advocate for interpretations that support collaboration, understanding, and dialogue contribute not only to a culture of resilience but also to one of hope, showing that peace is an attainable, sustainable, and ethically compelling goal.

Final Reflection

Religious stories hold immense potential to either divide or unite communities, depending on how they are interpreted and applied. Narratives like Esther's tale of survival and Jesus' call to love enemies are rich with meaning, capable of inspiring people toward both defensive resilience and compassionate peace. These stories offer powerful symbols that resonate deeply with collective identities and moral convictions. When approached thoughtfully, they can become tools for reconciliation and healing, reminding people of the shared values that bind them rather than the differences that separate them.

In a world where conflict often seems insurmountable, religious stories can be a source of hope, inspiring individuals and communities to look beyond immediate grievances and envision a future marked by harmony. By engaging with these narratives thoughtfully, leaders and individuals can encourage a culture that celebrates peace over division, mutual respect over antagonism, and shared humanity over enduring enmity. Such an approach to religious storytelling has the potential to not only transform interpersonal relationships but also reshape global

interactions, fostering a world where conflict gives way to the pursuit of unity, understanding, and lasting peace.

References

1. **Matthew 5:7** (NIV) – "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy."
    - Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount emphasizes mercy as a pathway to divine blessing, aligning with themes of forgiveness over retribution.
2. **Matthew 5:39** (NIV) – "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."
    - This verse underscores Jesus' call to respond to hostility with restraint and empathy, challenging cycles of retaliation.
3. **Matthew 5:44** (NIV) – "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."
    - Jesus' command to love enemies highlights the New Testament's emphasis on reconciliation and compassion over defensive or retaliatory action.
4. **Luke 10:25-37** (NIV) – The Parable of the Good Samaritan
    - In this parable, Jesus teaches the importance of compassion across cultural and religious boundaries, presenting a vision of shared humanity that transcends enmity.
5. **Romans 12:21** (NIV) – "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."
    - Paul's teaching reinforces the call to respond to adversity with positive actions, promoting peace over hostility and exemplifying New Testament values of mercy and reconciliation.
6. **Esther 9:1-5** (NIV) – The Jews defend themselves and defeat their enemies
    - The Book of Esther recounts the Jewish people's defense against their enemies in Persia, a narrative of survival and justified retribution that is commemorated in the Jewish festival of Purim.

7. **Esther 4:14** (NIV) – “And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”
    - Mordecai’s words to Esther inspire her to act on behalf of her people, underscoring themes of courage and advocacy for survival in the face of threats.
8. **Luke 6:27-28** (NIV) – “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”
    - Jesus’ instruction to love, bless, and pray for enemies further emphasizes the New Testament’s focus on peace and reconciliation, even toward adversaries.

This reference section provides relevant verses from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible that support the theological perspectives explored in the paper.